

Ford uses automated phone messages to fire Chicago workers

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Nearly 100 workers at the Ford Chicago Assembly plant received an automated phone message on October 31 telling them they had been terminated. Many of the workers who missed the robocalls or thought they were just a Halloween prank showed up for work the next day. When they arrived, their electronic identification cards were no longer operable and security guards instructed them to leave.

The mostly young workers were so-called Long-Term Supplemental (LTS) employees, one of the multiple “tiers” set up by Detroit automakers in collaboration with the United Auto Workers union. The LTS workers cannot accrue seniority and higher wages and are essentially at-will employees who can be fired or hired any time they are needed for production.

Most of the LTS workers were hired over the last four years as the Chicago plant added a second and third shift of workers. They are being tossed out because sales of the Taurus and Lincoln MKS models have recently fallen sharply.

A statement by Ford Motor Company read, “As part of our normal business process, we’ve temporarily adjusted our workforce numbers at Chicago Assembly Plant by approximately 90 team members. Our goal, as always, is to return the workers back to their positions as soon as possible based on the needs of our business.”

Predictably, UAW Local 551 officials, preoccupied with trying to get out the vote for various pro-business Democratic politicians, had nothing to say about workers being discarded like used up machinery. The UAW agreed to the establishment of this highly exploited temporary workforce in 2007 as part of the introduction of a new “second-tier” of workers earning half the wages of traditional workers.

Several workers at the Chicago plant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Ford probably used the robocalls

because management wanted to avoid the possibility of angry confrontations inside the plant with those laid off. After the last round of layoffs in 2008 management alleged that there were several incidents of sabotage on the plant floor.

“I saw 50 of those workers lining up outside Saturday morning and security told them they couldn’t enter,” one worker told the WWS. Another worker, Bridgette, said of the firings, “It’s BS. We all know the holidays are coming up at the end of the month. People have families and responsibilities. They should’ve at least been given two weeks notice, or even a month’s notice. It was really dirty the way they did it.”

Quin shook her head in disbelief, saying, “I heard about the layoffs. I’m sure they had families to feed and bills to pay. But it doesn’t surprise me. They treat us like crap here. We are constantly harassed. Our group leader bullies us and picks on everyone around us. There are rumors that there will be more layoffs.”

Another worker who wanted to remain anonymous, said, “You know, honestly, I never know if I will be next. They could do the same to any of us.”

The callous treatment of these workers is a measure of the real state of class relations in America where the financial and corporate elite—protected by their bought-and-paid for representatives in both big business parties and the businessmen who run the unions—feel they can lord over workers with impunity.

Auto workers, in particular, had attained a certain measure of job protection as a result of the mass industrial struggles from the 1930s to the 1970s. After decades of betrayals by the UAW, however, conditions for workers inside the auto factories increasingly resemble McDonald’s or Wal-Mart.

During the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry by the Obama administration, the UAW agreed to a vast

expansion of second-tier workers in exchange for billions of dollars in corporate stocks. Since 2009, the auto companies have hired thousands of new workers earning \$15.75 an hour. In Chicago, the number of workers increased from 1,100 to 4,100, with hundreds of LTS workers.

Layoffs are typically uncommon at the factory because of the high attrition rate. Large numbers of workers, both young and old, have grueling 10- and 12-hour schedules and at least 10 workers quit every week.

Derek, a young worker spoke of UAW complicity in the attack on the workers. “I heard about the LTS workers losing their jobs. It’s terrible. The union hasn’t done anything about it either. And for what? They just increased the monthly union dues to 2.5 hours of pay. We’re just blowing away money while none of us are protected.”

Jason described the deteriorating situation in the factory. “The conditions aren’t that good here. We don’t even get water to drink. No ice, no water. They should at least give us water.”

Another worker listening to Jason chimed in on the shop-floor conditions: “The conditions are filthy. We may work in a factory, but it always smells like chemicals and it’s terrible. We could be working in better conditions.

“And what I don’t like at all is that they tell you to park your car by the river if you drive a foreign car. How stupid is that? All the parts we use come from this country and all over the world!”

Well aware that the two-tier system is hated by rank-and-file workers, the UAW has postured as an opponent of the very system it installed. Newly selected UAW International President Dennis Williams claims the issue will be at the forefront of negotiations for new labor agreements with Ford, GM and Chrysler in 2015.

However, the sellout agreement at the nearby Lear Corporation plant in Hammond, Indiana shows what the UAW has in store for all auto workers in next year’s contract. After shutting down a one-day strike on September 13, the UAW signed a deal that creates a new class of “subassembly” employees who will receive wages even lower than those under the two-tier setup.

Ford and the other automakers rely on the UAW to enforce divisions among workers and prevent any

unified and collective resistance. The treatment meted out to LTS workers today will be the fate of all workers unless auto workers develop a new organization of struggle and a new political strategy.

The UAW is not an organization that defends workers. It is an instrument of corporate management that supports wage cutting, speed-up, layoffs and factory closures. In an earlier period workers were able to improve their conditions despite the pro-capitalist outlook of the unions and their support for the Democratic Party. The globalization of production, however, ended that, and today unions in the US and around the world are demanding the ever-greater impoverishment of workers to attract international investment.

Auto workers need new organizations of struggle that are controlled by the rank-and-file, independent of these reactionary corporate labor-management unions and the Democratic Party. Such organizations must be committed to the industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class, in the US and internationally, against the capitalist profit system.



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